

Canadian Historians, Secularization and the Problem of the Nineteenth Century¹

David B. MARSHALL

Religious history has been gaining some prominence in Canadian historiography and, not surprisingly, the most fundamental questions have erupted. The thorny question of secularization has moved to the forefront of inquiry.² Secularization is a term like modernization; it seeks to define a historical process that is extremely complex and highly controversial. It is tempting, at times, to throw up one's arms in frustration and dismay and abandon the concept in favour of another. The critics of the secularization thesis suggest that the term is too sweeping, especially in its implication of the decline and fall of religion. Some suggest a term such as "religious change" may be more precise.³ But this term is the most imprecise imag

¹ I would like to thank R.D. Gidney of the University of Western Ontario for his superb commentary on an earlier draft of this paper.

² There have been a number of historiographical essays that have addressed the secularization debate. An introduction to the debate appears in David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto 1992), pp. 1-29. See also, A.B. McKillop, "Culture Intellect and Context: Recent Writing on the Cultural and Intellectual History of Ontario," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 24, 3, Fall 1989, pp. 19-24; Chad Reimer, "Review: Religion and Culture in Nineteenth Century English Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 25, 1, Spring 1990, pp. 192-203; Michael Gauvreau, "Beyond the Half-Way House: Evangelism and the Shaping of English Canadian Culture," *Acadiensis*, 20, 2, Spring 1991, pp. 158-77; Ramsay Cook, "Ambiguous Heritage: Wesley College and the Social Gospel Re-considered," *Manitoba History*, Spring 1991, pp. 2-11; and T. Kroeker, "Theology, Ethics and Social Theory: The Social Gospel Quest for a Public Morality," *Studies in Religion*, 20, 2, 1991, pp. 181-99.

³ Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal 1989), pp. 186-8, 193-6; Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal 1992), p. 166 n4; and "Ordering a New

inable, for historians are always describing and analyzing change or the reasons for a lack of it. There is little question that Protestant beliefs and practices have undergone significant change. The question is whether the changes involved a process of secularization. Indeed insistence on religious change as an analytical tool may be a way to mask belief in the certain on-going Christianization of society.

Whether secularization has existed or not does not seem to be the primary issue. Indeed the most vociferous critic of the secularization thesis, Michael Gauvreau, has admitted that spirituality has been largely lost in modern society and that churches in English Canadian society have become less relevant.⁴ Another critic of the secularization thesis, Marguerite Van Die, suggests that the result of the changes within the evangelical faith was the weakening of religion. In an analysis that in a way sounds strikingly similar to the proponents of the secularization thesis who identify the seeds of religious doubt in the ministrations of the faithful, she writes:

It will also be noted that by its very desire to transform and Christianize culture, late nineteenth-century evangelicalism in Canada had to undergo change, for it had become inextricably connected to, and in the end vitiated by, culture. And so, ultimately this book points to the irony that by the early decades of the twentieth century, evangelical Christianity had been undermined perhaps more by the compelling vision of men and women of faith than by the destructive seeds of religious doubt.⁵

At issue are the questions of when and how did secularization occur. In *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940*, I suggest a long-term incremental model without a definite “birth certificate.” Others suggest that secularization “took off” in the late Victorian age as a result of the social changes brought by the new urban-industrial order as well as the intellectual challenges posed by evolution, biblical criticism, and critical inquiry.⁶ In sharp contrast, the critics of the

Nation and Reordering Protestantism 1867-1914” in George Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience* (Burlington 1990), p. 125. There are similar problems with terms like industrialization or urbanization, but in the end they cannot be abandoned.

⁴ Michael Gauvreau, “Beyond the Half-Way House,” pp. 174-5.

⁵ *An Evangelical Mind*, pp. 12-3

⁶ A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Age* (Montreal 1979), pp. 216-28; Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto 1985),

secularization thesis argue that religion remained a vital force during the social and intellectual turmoil of the late Victorian age. There was change but the essential core of evangelicalism remained unscathed. In *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression*, Michael Gauvreau launches an explicit and sustained attack on the secularization thesis, arguing that the clergymen-professors in the Methodist and Presbyterian theological colleges were able to sustain their belief in the evangelical creed throughout the nineteenth century. He does not see a crisis of belief until the emergence of “historical relativism” which questioned the idea of absolute truth and sacred history and he pinpoints the dawning of this undermining of the evangelical creed at around 1905. Gauvreau asserts that to suggest that secularization was under way in the nineteenth century is to read history backwards by imposing the secular characteristics of the twentieth century on the past.⁷

The critical response to the secularization thesis indicates that the term continues to be a red flag in front of many historians in Canada. Many persist in using the much maligned decline and fall view of secularization in order to criticize its application to the Canadian scene. Indeed most of the works that are critical of the secularization thesis do not investigate the meaning of this involved and subtle term. Secularization does not denote an inevitable, linear, unstoppable process. To suggest that secularization is underway does not mean that religion is in some kind of absolute precipitous decline.

The thorny question of what is secularization must be addressed. This matter of definition is crucial, as most commentators on the debate agree that many of the disputes are tied up in differences in defining secularization.⁸ On one level, secularization is a process whereby religious thinking, practices, and institutions lose their significance in society. Religious considerations move from the very core of social, cultural and intellectual life to the periphery. Whereas religion once permeated society; it becomes an option among many other possibilities in a highly pluralistic society. This aspect of secularization does not deal with the nature, extent, and intensity of religious belief. The character of religious beliefs and practice also has to be considered. This is very uncertain and controversial territory for it is extremely difficult for the historian to assess or measure people’s religious

6, pp. 228-32

⁷ Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal 1991), pp. 5-6.

⁸ Steve Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization: Historians and Sociologists Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), passim.

beliefs. Within Christianity, it involves faith in the abiding existence of God, including the conviction that events or misfortunes can be the result of divine Providence. Belief in personal sinfulness and the reality of an afterlife as well as the acceptance of the historical truth of biblical miracles, especially Christ's resurrection are also central to Christianity. Secularization does not involve an abandonment of these beliefs, but whether they are held with a continuing sense of confidence or whether reservations, qualifications, and doubts have emerged and to what degree these doubts have led to indifference or a lack of religious observance and practice. Similarly, religious practices, such as attendance at church, daily prayer, and the degree to which the rites of passage in life are accompanied by religious or sacramental ceremony are central to any consideration of secularization.

There is a necessity for caution and refinement here. Secularization implies a weakening of the role of religion, but not its absence; the attenuation of supernatural or miraculous beliefs, but not their disappearance; and less frequent religious observance, but not abandonment. Still more caution is necessary, for secular forces can be underway in a society in which religion is strong, if not growing, in some form. Secularization, therefore, is a complex and multi-faceted process which defies easy identification or dismissal.

That this debate has become so intense, to an extent, is a reflection of how difficult it is for historians to assess religious piety. They face the considerable challenge of assessing the religious lives of people. Assuming that congregations were in complete agreement with their minister is highly questionable. Discovering the beliefs of the people sitting in the church pews is extremely difficult, for religious worship can be intensely private. Other aspects of religious piety, such as how frequently and for what reasons people pray or what kind of devotional activities they participate in, need to be assessed. These difficult areas of history have not been surmounted by Canadian historians. As a result, a great deal of the secularization debate has been confined to narrow intellectual studies of the elite.

The critics of the secularization thesis have largely confined their work to theologians and theological colleges; whereas the proponents of the secularization thesis have strayed outside the cloister of the churches and analyzed the thought and activities of people outside the theological hall and the manse. What is clear is that intellectual history does not provide a sufficiently wide prism to study secularization. One cannot assess the secularization of society or religion and the churches through the narrow confines of religious thought or theology. A much broader focus is necessary.

We need to know much more about the nineteenth century before the secularization thesis can be confidently dismissed. One of the weaknesses that Gauvreau identifies in the secularization thesis outlined by McKillop, Cook, and Marshall is a failure to account for ‘the timing or intensity of the mood of crisis that overtook the evangelical churches.’ Gauvreau argues that a precise chronology is necessary in order to establish the legitimacy of the secularization thesis.⁹ The timing of secularization has perplexed historians and most avoid the kind of precision Gauvreau is calling for.

There is little consensus about the genesis of secularization. Commentators acknowledge the significant elements of renewal in the Protestant Reformation; but they have also suggested that the roots of secularization may rest in that central event in the history of Christianity. It displaced many beliefs and practices that had given security and meaning to life and robbed Christianity of some of its aura of the miraculous and supernatural.¹⁰ The argument that the Reformation fostered an independent cast of mind, which encouraged people to challenge the teachings of the Church and pursue their own spiritual truth by reading Scripture for themselves has more potent implications for the secularization thesis. In his highly innovative study of the Reformation’s impact on popular beliefs and daily life, Stephen Ozment has suggested that this “new found independence of mind ... eventually worked as much against the new clergy ... as it did against Roman Catholicism ... [and] rendered the Reformation something of a Pyrrhic victory.”¹¹

Certainty about the role of the Reformation in the process of secularization cannot be established. Just how difficult it is to identify the beginnings of secularization in western societies is suggested by Patrick Collinson, who wonders whether it happened “with industrialization and urbanization or much earlier as a consequence of the Protestant onslaught on time-honoured rituals and the arbitrary destruction of dear and familiar images? Or conversely, did the Reformation as an episode in the re-Christianization ...decelerate or arrest a process of secularization with

⁹ Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, p. 220

¹⁰ This view has been advanced by many historians, including Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London 1971) pp. 58-89; and John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (London 1985), pp. 91-152.

¹¹ Stephen Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York 1992), p. 192. This argument was suggested by Herbert Butterfield in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York, Norton Library edition, 1965), pp. 54-5.

deeper roots?¹² He acknowledges that this problem may never be resolved, since medievalists can not tell us whether traditional Christian society ever existed.¹³ What seems clear is that a “golden age of religiosity” never existed.

What the proponents of secularization maintain is that there was a time when references to the supernatural were frequently made. The reality of spiritual things was accepted. Everyday life was regulated by a variety of superstitions, prayers, intercessions, masses, and pilgrimages designed to influence the supernatural. The rites of passage – birth, coming of age, marriage, and death – were infused with religious prescriptions and interdictions. The Church was central to social, judicial, political, and intellectual life. There was doubt, skepticism, ignorance, and indifference; but there was also a widespread sense of closeness to God and a very real belief in the devil. The world – whether it be life and death, good or bad fortune, the weather and the change of the seasons, or an abundance or paucity of food – could not be explained without reference to the supernatural.¹⁴

This commentary on the Reformation may strike readers as being remote from the Canadian debate; but in my view it is central to secularization in Protestant Canada. The Reformation created a multiplicity of national churches and dissenting groups. This new situation, A.G. Dickens has perceptively pointed out, “led to practical experiments in toleration, and where it was proved that such toleration could subsist without disaster, the more positive appeals of religious liberty were bound sooner or later to make their appeal. At varying rates most of the people bought their freedom. The price in terms of spiritual confusion proved high.”¹⁵ There was confusion because there was now keen debate about the essentials of Christian belief

¹² Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants, The Church in English Society, 1559-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 198-9.

¹³ For a sense of the mix of Christian beliefs with magic and superstition in the medieval world, see E. Le Roy Ladurie, (trans. B. Bray) *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York, 1978), pp. 288-326, 342-56.

¹⁴ There is a range of interpretation on this question of religiosity. Those historians who see the Christian religion and the Church being prominent include Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants*, pp. 189-195; and Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London 1971), p. 74. Those historians stressing non-Christian magical and folkloric beliefs in the supernatural include Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 90-132, 179-206; and Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism Between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation* (London 1977), pp. 154-174. Both sides agree that belief in some form of the supernatural, whether a Christian or a pagan understanding, was widespread.

¹⁵ A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London 1983), p. 441

and practice. The religious diversity that was one of the many by-products of the Reformation forced some degree of religious toleration. Both Herbert Butterfield and Owen Chadwick have made it clear that religious toleration is an important pre-condition for secularization. “Toleration,” Butterfield has written, “by paths almost too intricate to trace” has led to a degree of religious liberty and in its train “that whole tendency which the historian likes to call the process of secularization.”¹⁶

To an important extent, the debate over secularization rests on whether one focuses on the history of beliefs – as most of the critics of secularization do – or the social history of religion. In *The Evangelical Century*, Michael Gauvreau suggests that the evangelical creed, which stressed belief in divine transcendence, human sinfulness, and the inerrancy of sacred scripture, is absolutely essential to understanding the Protestant experience in Canada. But we do not know very much about the beliefs of the many Protestants who settled in British North America in the colonial period. With the notable exception of the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia led by Henry Alline, this period represents a dark ages in historiography. Little is known about popular religion.¹⁷ The extent of Christian beliefs, degree of indifference or ignorance, and presence of superstition or magical beliefs has not been studied.

Certainly evangelicalism defines the religious outlook of most Protestants in nineteenth century Canada. But the considerable variety of peoples from different denominations or religious temperaments – Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist Lutheran, Quaker, Mennonite, and Moravian – who settled in British North America is even more important.¹⁸ The social history of religion is crucial to understanding

¹⁶ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, p. 38; Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind* (Cambridge 1975), pp. 27-32.

¹⁷ The Great Awakening in Nova Scotia is without question the most studied topic in Canadian religious history with numerous monographs, biographical studies, and documentary collections. George Rawlyk’s on-going work on the evangelical tradition in Canada is sketching in more detail regarding this early period. For example, George Rawlyk, *Wrapped Up in God: A Study of Several Canadian Revivals and Revivalists* (Burlington, Ont. 1988)

¹⁸ John Webster Grant concludes that this diversity was “relatively narrow” in its range. “The great bulk of early settlers would have identified themselves without hesitation as belonging to the mainstream of Protestantism. Even those who did not attend church had been formed, more than they knew, by its precepts and presuppositions. Their very doubts and objections were Protestant.” *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto 1988), p. 25.

the shape and course of the religious experience in Canada. This diversity was a pre-condition for the process of secularization.

For religious diversity to have the impact of weakening religion, frequent contact between the different denominations or religious traditions was necessary. During this early period many communities were not served by a permanently stationed clergyman and many areas lacked a church to house regular worship services. As a result, many settlers joined whatever denomination happened to sponsor a camp-meeting, establish a mission station, or build a church nearby.¹⁹ There is also some evidence of people changing denominations because their individual conscience felt that one church was more suitable or closer to Christian truth in its teaching than another.²⁰ Only if alternative denominations or religious traditions were known about – clearly the case in this fluid religious environment – would debate and doubt about religious faith emerge. The roots of secularization rest in the very makeup or religious pluralism that was established during the earliest settlement period. Within the vibrancy of religious life in British North America, there was the potential for debate and conflict about important religious matters, and certainly there was an abundance of choice with respect what path one could follow.

This does not mean that Canada was a secular society at this early stage. There is an important distinction between pre-condition and actual process. Secularization was not an inevitable consequence of this situation. A great deal depended on how this religious diversity was dealt with and what other forces emerged.²¹

It may be fruitful here, to turn our attention to the Catholic experience in Canada. The religious diversity model does not apply to all of Canadian society. In those regions where there was not a great deal of religious diversity and amongst those groups in which religion became integral to holding on to a unique identity there is considerable evidence of religious

¹⁹ W. Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Montreal 1991), pp. 45-7.

²⁰ The religious odyssey of Francis Huston Wallace from Calvinism to Methodism during a period of intense spiritual doubt in 1871 is a good example. See the account in *Secularizing the Faith*, pp. 34-7.

²¹ The counter thesis to this point of view suggests that religious diversity strengthens the appeal of religion because there is something for varying religious sensibilities. In a recent review of this debate Steve Bruce suggests that much more research and refinement is required before the question of religious pluralism and vitality or doubt can be resolved. Steve Bruce, "Pluralism and Religious Vitality," Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization*, p. 192.

vitality and institutional growth. This “sacredization” becomes most clear in relation to the Catholic church in Quebec and amongst the Irish.

The Catholic church in Quebec experienced renewal beginning in the 1840s under the ultramontane Bishop Bourget. In the aftermath of the rebellions of 1837-8 amidst fears of assimilation, the Catholic church became crucial to French Canadian survival. To an extent, the renewal of the church in Quebec society was tied to nationalist aspirations. A very weak church that did not command a great deal of respect from the parishioners was transformed into the “church triumphant.”²² Changes in religious life or piety were also crucial to the renewal of religion in French Canadian society. The “devotional revolution” re-introduced many Catholic Orders into Quebec society and more importantly reinvigorated Catholic sacramental life.²³ Numerous exercises, such as saying the Rosary, attending vespers, devotion to the Immaculate Conception and the Sacred Heart, visiting shrines, participating in processions, became an integral part of Catholic religious life. These devotions fostered veneration for the beauty and mystery of the Sacraments. Moreover, this high amount of devotional practice and the central place of the Catholic church in education, health services, and welfare stretched well into the twentieth century.²⁴ There were limits to the Church’s influence; but it was not until the Quiet Revolution and Vatican II that Quebec society began to experience significant secularization pressure.²⁵ Secularization in Quebec seems to be a very recent, relatively sudden and dramatic event instead of something deeply rooted in the nineteenth century.

The experience of the English speaking Catholic community demonstrates a further variation in the religious pluralism model. Brian Clarke has recently demonstrated how church life among the Irish Catholics in Toronto was central to the maintenance of their sense of nationalism or ethnic identity. His richly documented, *Piety and Nationalism: Lay*

²² Jean-Pierre Wallot, “Religion and French Canadian Mores in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 52, March 1971; Paul-Andre Linteau et al, *Quebec: A History 1867-1929* (Toronto 1983), pp. 198-204.

²³ On ultramontanism and the Catholic revival in post 1840 Quebec society, see Nive Voisine, “L’ultramontanisme canadien-francais au XIXe siecle,” in Nive Voisine et Jean Hamelin eds., *Les Ultramontains Canadiens Francais* (Montreal 1985), pp. 67-104; and Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* (Toronto 1987), pp. 29-36.

²⁴ Linteau et al, *Quebec: A History 1867-1929*, pp. 454-460.

²⁵ Susan Mann Trofimenkoff explores this important relationship in *The Dream of Nation: A Social and Intellectual History of Quebec* (Toronto 1982), pp. 301-5.

Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish Catholic Community in Toronto, 1850-1895, details the potent devotional life – especially among the women – that emerged throughout the nineteenth century.²⁶ There are many parallels in the importance of the devotional revolution between the French Canadian and Irish Catholic communities. But, in the end, Toronto was not the homogeneous society that French-speaking Quebec was. The Irish in Toronto were under pressure to conform to English-speaking Canadian society. In the more diverse society of Toronto, a significant number of inter-marriages between Catholics and Protestants occurred in the early twentieth century. The extent to which Catholic religious beliefs were compromised in these marriages or the fact that the children of mixed-marriages were not brought up in the Catholic faith may be an indication of secularizing pressures in a religiously pluralistic community. The early twentieth century was a stormy time for Catholicism. In his discussion of the “Americanist heresies,” Mark McGowan suggests other areas of traditional Catholic devotion – such as the traditional Latin liturgy – were subject to pressures that may have indicated a process of secularization. Pope Pius X initiated a programme to “restore” traditional Catholic devotions. Such attempts to halt accommodations with North American cultural norms were resisted within many of Toronto’s local Catholic churches.²⁷

To an extent, the strength of Catholicism in these settings reflects an important degree of homogeneity that was not duplicated in Protestant Canada. In the case of the Irish in Toronto, there does not seem to be any significant evidence of leakage away from the Catholic faith – or possibly secularization – until the strong ethnic boundaries were relaxed in the early twentieth century.²⁸

But there may be another important reason for the apparent strength of Catholicism in nineteenth century Canada compared to the difficulties being encountered by Protestantism. In terms of lay devotion, Catholicism was better able to withstand the acids of modernity. Some of the sources of doubt and secularization – modern science and biblical criticism – were more

²⁶ Brian Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism: Lay Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish-Catholic Community in Toronto, 1850-1895* (Montreal 1993).

²⁷ Mark McGowan, “The Catholic Restoration: Pope Pius X, Archbishop Denis O’Connor, and Popular Catholicism in Toronto 1899-1908,” *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Historical Studies* 54 (1987).

²⁸ Mark McGowan, “The De-Greening of the Irish: Toronto’s Irish-Catholic Press, Imperialism, and the Forging of a New Identity, 1887-1914,” *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Historical Papers*, 1989, pp. 118-45.

threatening to Protestantism because of its heavy reliance on the Word of God in the Bible as the ultimate and only source of authority and doctrine. When the Bible was questioned the whole edifice of Protestantism became vulnerable because so much of devotional life was dependent on reading Scriptures. *The Syllabus of Errors* indicates that Catholicism was also vulnerable to the modernist assault on the Word, doctrine, and church teaching. But modernism did not touch lay devotional life within Catholicism as directly. Those very elements of Catholicism that Protestantism had rejected or was highly critical of – the authority of Church Fathers, emphasis on the Eucharist instead of the Word, attention to traditional Latin liturgy, the veneration of saints and relics, Marian devotion – were the very things that allowed Catholicism to better withstand some of the secularizing pressures that so troubled the Protestant world.

Some historians have suggested that the whole secularization debate is best understood in terms of religious “profit and loss” – a process of de-Christianization and re-Christianization or secularization and sacredization that can occur simultaneously. Perhaps the fact that Catholicism was the religion of the minorities struggling to maintain their identity and that it was a sacramental faith not dependent on the Word meant that sacredization was a more powerful force than secularization in the nineteenth century.²⁹ The story of secularization in the Protestant and Catholic communities is substantially different. The forces of secularization within Protestant culture were more powerful. The 1840s marked the beginnings of a devotional revolution in Catholicism that saw a revitalization of religious life and the strengthening of the churches role in education and social welfare. In Protestant Canada, the 1840s marked the beginnings of the separation of church and state, a contentious political issue which recognized the reality of pluralism and dissent within Protestantism.

A great deal of historiographical attention has focussed on church-state relations. This “old chestnut” does provide one of the keys to understanding the roots of secularization in the mid-nineteenth century because the separation of church and state was in large measure a response to the religious diversity of Canadian society. William Westfall’s study of the divergence between the “religion of order” and the “religion of experience”

²⁹ Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914* (London 1989). Gibson argues that Catholicism was vulnerable to attacks on its doctrines and teaching through the speculative work of critics such as Renan. But this secularizing pressure was overwhelmed by the forces of re-Christianization that came from Marian devotion, ultramontane piety, and a decline in preaching the harsh doctrines of hell and damnation, pp. 225-67.

in *Two Worlds* makes it abundantly clear that debate about the most basic questions of sacred history and meaning of the Bible were at the root of the church-state controversies.³⁰ As important as the evangelical creed was there was intense controversy within it. No one point of view or denomination was able to gain clear ascendancy. The persistence of religious pluralism forced the exponents of an established church designed to uphold one “true” faith to abandon – albeit reluctantly – their insistence on a religious monopoly. Conviction that an established faith was necessary for religious progress was superseded by the “voluntary principle” or voluntarism – the belief that the state should not support the churches or clergy. Instead, an increasing number within the evangelical camp thought that support should be based on voluntary contributions that would be determined solely by the conscience of churches’ members and adherents. Only in this way, it was thought, could true religion flourish, for it would not have to make any compromises with the state. The secularization of the Clergy Reserves in 1854 marked an important advance for voluntarism in Canadian society.³¹

The significance of the secularization of the Clergy Reserves – or disestablishment – is highly debateable. It did not mark the beginning of a secular age in Canada. Certainly, the evangelical churches emerged as vibrant voluntary institutions in the period following the church-state disputes.³² But, there might have been longer term and more subtle implications stemming from the separation of church and state in Canada. The demise of the established church represented an important shift in attitudes toward a more secular worldview. Traditionally, it was held that maintaining the social order demanded conformity to specific religious beliefs taught by an established church. In *Two Worlds*, Westfall argues that

³⁰ Westfall, *Two Worlds*, pp. 19-49; and William Westfall, “Order and Experience: Patterns of Religious Metaphor in Early Nineteenth Century Upper Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 20, Spring 1985, pp. 5-24.

³¹ It would be incorrect to suggest that the forces of “voluntarism” or “secularization of the reserves” had been completely victorious, for the legislation provided guarantees of continued support for the beneficiaries and the rectories remained in tact. See Alan Wilson, *The Clergy Reserves* (Ottawa 1969), p. 21 and Curtis Fahey, *In His Name: The Anglican Experience in Upper Canada, 1791-1854* (Ottawa 1991), p. 175.

³² John S. Moir, *The Church in the British Era* (Toronto 1972), pp. 189-213; J.W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Toronto 1972), pp. 1-67 and *A Profusion of Spires*, pp. 152-203. In the aftermath of disestablishment, the Church of England successfully transformed into a self-supporting institution with growing numbers, but in other ways it was a deeply troubled institution for it had become confused about its mission and message. See Fahey, *In His Name*, pp. 297-98.

this belief in the role of an established faith was sacrificed with the secularization of the reserves. In essence, the state abandoned the established church and adopted a more secular ideology which stressed material prosperity and progress to assure social and political stability. "Progress," he provocatively suggests, "was to replace religion as the new opiate of the masses." As a result Protestant culture became increasingly dedicated to the spiritual renewal of an increasingly materialistic society.³³

Furthermore, the social and religious implications of voluntarism have not been closely investigated by Canadian historians. Did voluntarism, as many Church of England and Church of Scotland divines forewarned, lead to a situation in which the clergy were robbed of a secure benefice leaving them subject to the vagaries of the marketplace in order to gain adequate support? It was feared that as a result the clergy would have to appeal to the values and beliefs of their flock in order to maintain a following. Failure to be appealing and hold interest might well lead to a decline in support. Religion would be in danger of being compromised with questionable ideas, unsound doctrinal beliefs and sensational worship practices in such an open atmosphere in order to maintain a following. Did the church and clergy become the subjects of popular culture instead of the arbiters of the Christian faith?³⁴

The relationship between religion and public education was also tied up in the church-state disputes. In countering any conclusion that the dis-establishment of the 1850s represented a secularization of society, Michael Gauvreau has asserted that "it was no coincidence that the final 'secularization' of the Clergy Reserves in 1854 occurred only after a viable, state-controlled system of public education had been established."³⁵ Indeed Egerton Ryerson, the Methodist itinerant preacher who became the architect of the Ontario school system, envisioned a state-run school system with emphasis on teaching "the essential elements and truths and morals of Christianity" as the most effective way to safeguard the spiritual foundation of society. Teaching Christian truths would be taken out of the intercene atmosphere of sectarian conflict, which distracted the churches from their primary task of evangelization, and placed in the schools where there would be reasonable assurance that the young would receive a basic religious

³³ William Westfall, *Two Worlds*, pp. 107-11.

³⁴ These issues have also been raised by William Westfall, *Two Worlds*, pp. 100-1; and Curtis Fahey, *In His Name*, pp. 130-1, 176-7, 217-29.

³⁵ Michael Gauvreau, "Protestantism Transformed: Personal Piety and the Evangelical Social Vision, 1815-1867" in George Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Burlington Ont. 1990), p. 91.

education. Closer inspection of the school system in Ontario throughout the nineteenth century makes confident assurance about whether the schools buttressed or strengthened the religious foundation of society questionable.

The clergy played a significant role in the early Upper Canadian school system.³⁶ Many members of the ruling class – the family compact – sent their children to the rector John Strachan’s school in Cornwall. This school was a training ground for members of the political elite such as John Beverly Robinson.³⁷ Often the Bible was used as a textbook. One of the major motives in establishing the early schools was to create literate people who could read the Bible, a foundation for Protestant worship. The important role of religion in developing the school system is best symbolized by the fact that the modern school system in Ontario society was largely developed by three prominent clergymen – John Strachan, Egerton Ryerson, and Robert Murray. The reforms that Ryerson introduced in the 1840s and 1850s maintained Christianity as “the basis and cement of the structure of public education.” The Bible was no longer a textbook; but scriptures were read and the Ten Commandments and Lord’s Prayer were recited. Religious instruction was designed to promote a sense of common Christianity that would serve as the foundation for moral instruction and inculcating good citizenship. Another important aspect of the school legislation was the stipulation that no student would be required “to read or study in or from any religious book or join in any exercise of devotion or religion objected to.”³⁸ Pluralism within the Protestant community meant that religious instruction in the school system could not be imposed. Such tolerance was necessary for the school system to gain wide public support.

The secular implications of the state run school system can be seen more clearly in the changing administration of the schools. The role of the clergy in the schools receded from the mid to late nineteenth century. By the 1850s, the clergy had moved out of the classroom as teaching became professionalised. Until the 1870s, clergy were counted among the ranks of the Grammar school inspectors and local superintendents. But after 1871, the whole system of inspectors, superintendents and senior administrators were drawn from the teaching profession. The Ontario schools system was largely

³⁶ Susan Houston & Alison Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth Century Canada* (Toronto 1988), pp. 33-87.

³⁷ George W. Spragge, “The Cornwall Grammar School under John Strachan, 1803-1812,” *Ontario History*, 34, 1942, pp. 63-84; and “John Strachan’s Contribution to Education 1800-23,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 22, pp. 147-58.

³⁸ Quoted in Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada West 1836-71* (London, Ont. 1988), pp. 110-11.

controlled by a state bureaucracy by the end of the nineteenth century. An area that historically had been central to the concern of the churches – the education of the young – had clearly passed out of the hands of clerical control or substantial clerical influence.³⁹

This separation of the school system from the churches and its incorporation into the state should not be viewed as a complete victory of the secular over the sacred. The religious motivation in educating people receded as it became increasingly important for people to acquire the requisite skills for commerce and the emerging urban-industrial society.⁴⁰ But few would have contemplated a school system without a religious foundation. It was still thought that religious values were fundamental. The necessary discipline and work ethic for economic progress was assumed to be rooted in Protestant Christianity.⁴¹ Any conclusion about the significance of the mid-nineteenth century school reforms must be cognizant of both the powerful religious and secular forces at work. Whether religion was strengthened as a result of state control is debateable. Despite the religious foundation to Ryerson's system, there were powerful secular forces at work in the school system and the curriculum. There cannot be any strict compartmentalization of the sacred and the secular in considering the history of the nineteenth century.

If there was a period of consensus or a lack of intense debate about religious beliefs and practices within Canadian Protestantism, it was shortlived – perhaps from the time when church-state controversies subsided in the 1850s to sometime in the 1870s when the implications of modern thought had to be confronted. But even during this relatively quiescent period in Canadian Protestant history the fact of religious diversity is central.⁴²

³⁹ Bruce Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men? Inspection, Education and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto 1992).

⁴⁰ See Alison Prentice, *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada* (Toronto 1976), passim; S. Houston and A. Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth Century Ontario*, pp. 189-272; and R.D. Gidney & W.P.J. Millar, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Montreal 1990), passim.

⁴¹ The integral relation between religious motivations and secular objectives is made most clear in B. Anne Wood, "The Significance of Evangelical Presbyterian Politics in the Construction of State Schooling: A Case Study of the Pictou District, 1817-1866," *Acadiensis*, 20, 2, Spring 1991, pp. 78, 83.

⁴² Gauvreau's "consensus model" underestimates the degree of debate within the Protestant community, since his study focusses on only two traditions – Methodist and Presbyterian – that proved to be part of the mainstream. Consideration of other dissenting denominations, such as the Baptists, who were engaged in debate with the other churches about baptism, easily undermines any consensus model. Almost

Indeed the sheer volume of controversial literature from the pens of the clergy about a vast range of theological topics, questions of church polity, and matters of proper forms of worship indicates clear and substantial divisiveness. The various Protestant denominations still competed for the souls of the people. A certain degree of toleration was a necessary response to the diversity of religious beliefs and practices that had become so firmly rooted in the fabric of Canadian society by the 1850s. Well before the outbreak of controversy over modern thought, which is the major battleground of the secularization debate, the roots of secularization were established. From the Reformation, Canada inherited a diversity of religious peoples which necessitated some degree of religious toleration and separation of church from state.⁴³ It also meant that choice was possible. Indifference, skepticism, or outright disbelief might also become options in a society where diversity of belief was a fundamental fact.

hidden from the historians view was the presence of many other splinter religious groups, such as the Millerites, which caused an immense amount of controversy, given their small numbers in the 1840s. See Westfall, *Two Worlds*, pp. 167-76. Phyllis Airhart's discussion of the revivalist tradition reveals that there were important controversies over the Methodist understanding and practice of evangelism from groups such as the Plymouth Brethren, Canadian Holiness Association, and the Keswick movement. *Serving the Present Age*, pp. 39-54.

⁴³ There were clear limits to this religious toleration, a topic that requires more investigation by historians of Canada. On a popular level a great deal of inter-denominational bigotry and rivalry has persisted between various major Protestant denominations. The ecumenicalism of the twentieth century has broken some of this down. But there have been real limits to the degree of toleration offered to religious groups outside the Protestant mainstream. See, for example, William Kaplan, *State and Salvation: The Jehovah's Witnesses and Their Fight for Civil Rights* (Toronto 1989). The literature on Protestant intolerance toward Catholicism is extensive. For an overview of Protestant misunderstanding and bigotry, see J.R. Miller, "Anti-Catholic Thought in Victorian Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, 66, 4, Dec. 1985 and "Anti-Catholicism in Canada From the British Conquest to the Great War" in Terrence Murphy & Gerald Stortz, eds., *Creed and Culture: The Place of English Speaking Catholics in Canadian Society* (Montreal 1993). Recent work by Mark McGowan has raised serious questions about the traditional image of Protestant-Catholic bigotry. Too much attention, he argues has centred on the controversial issues that divided the two, such as schools questions, and not enough attention has focussed on the people in the pews and how they interacted. See Mark McGowan, "Rethinking Catholic-Protestant Relations in Canada: The Episcopal Reports of 1900-1901", *Canadian Catholic Historical Association Historical Studies* (1992), pp. 11-35.

In suggesting that the roots of secularization rest in this early period, I am not arguing that religion had been seriously diminished. On the contrary, extensive revival activity and church growth characterized the religious history of the colonial period in Canada. The impact of this religious activity was clear in the formation of Bible and tract societies, Sunday schools, colleges, home and foreign mission activity, temperance societies, and other reform movements. The influence of the churches stretched out in almost every conceivable direction. There was a certain identification between church and society as transgressions against a moral code often led to some form of church discipline and social ostracization. The churches played a crucial role in the regulation of sexuality and marriage and popular attitudes were shaped by Christian teachings on these most intimate of matters.⁴⁴

Clarification of what is meant by secularization is necessary here. Religion can be a vibrant force and churches can be thriving while secular forces are also at play. During this early period when the roots of secularization appeared it was not inevitable that secular forces would take-off. Other factors were necessary. When people were confronted by a myriad of changes in life – whether they were technological advance, the rise of capitalism, urbanization, or modern thought – the possibility of a more secular society became real. The response did not need to be religious. What we have to discern, therefore, is when did secular considerations become prominent.

In this light the question of the science versus religion debate – whether or not the rise of evolutionary thought and biblical criticism in the late nineteenth century augured a crisis of faith and set in motion a process of secularization – needs to be reassessed. Both Gauvreau and Marshall reject the “military metaphor” of open warfare and ultimate defeat for religion in explaining the impact of Darwinian thought.⁴⁵ Gauvreau, in particular, demonstrates how theologians and clergymen informed by an evangelical creed were able to accept the insights of evolutionary science and reverent biblical criticism without undermining Christian faith or compromising the evangelical creed. Indeed, this is the foundation for his attack on the secularization thesis and how it has been applied by Cook and McKillop. In *Secularizing the Faith*, I am a little more ambivalent. I acknowledge that

⁴⁴ See Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love, and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal 1990), pp. 15-31.

⁴⁵ Both authors follow the important revisionist work by James R. Moore, *The PostDarwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America 1870-1900* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).

many clergy were able to incorporate certain elements of Darwinian thought and biblical criticism to build a renewed Christianity that was perhaps responsible for saving many from being cast upon the shoals of doubt and despair. The notion of “progressive revelation” and idea that religious understanding could be refined allowed for the abandonment of troubling doctrines and sections of the Bible. But I also suggest that this new Christianity was not based on a bedrock of certainty but rather contained powerful seeds of doubt. Constant improvement or evolution in human understanding of the Gospel meant that there was always the possibility of further revision. There was the potential of perpetual surrendering of deeply held religious convictions on the basis that a clearer understanding of Christianity had been revealed through further inquiry. What were the divine truths in the Bible and what were the products of human understanding and imagination were perhaps forever open questions. Theologians and liberal clergy may have known what they believed but they began to preach in a way that lacked the clarity and simplicity that many laypersons sought, perhaps making it difficult for them to respond to sermons with the same degree of conviction and assurance.

As in any revisionist movement, it may be that the pendulum has swung too far against the notion that science somehow undermined religion in the nineteenth century. It may be that the relation between religion and science was much more ambiguous than either the model of conflict or accommodation and harmony have indicated.⁴⁶ Both Gauvreau and Marshall build their case on the reaction of a small group of clergy or theologians. This narrow perspective overlooks too much. There is little balance in the analysis, for little work has been done on science. This is a serious shortcoming because the relationship between science and religion is a reciprocal one. Perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that the Darwinian revolution provoked a reversal of fortunes in the status of science and religion, instead of undermining the truth of Christianity.

In the early nineteenth century the religious assumptions of Natural Theology shaped a great deal of scientific activity. By the end of the nineteenth century, Natural Theology had been eased out of a scientific

⁴⁶ In *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge 1991), John Hedley Brooke concludes that it is “necessary to consider whether revisionist histories, structured around a critique of the conflict thesis, have not gone too far in the opposite direction. The apologetic intentions of secularists and religious thinkers have so colored the literature that a fresh approach is required.” The preoccupation with conflict or harmony has clouded understanding of the relationship between science and religion and “it is necessary to transcend these constraints if the interaction, in all its richness and fascination is to be appreciated.” (12,51).

culture that was becoming highly specialized. Churchmen like Nathanael Burwash, who held a university chair teaching science, were figures of a bygone scientific community by the early twentieth century.⁴⁷ That Protestant divines were making herculean efforts to find common ground between religion and science may be a sign that they realized religion was no longer integral to the pursuit of science. This does not imply a separation of religion from science but rather a decline in religion's status within scientific knowledge.⁴⁸ Science was no longer subordinate to religion. Scientific innovation – the Darwinian revolution and scientific history – began to shape theological understanding. The rising authority of science as a source of knowledge is a potent indication of the decline of religion's role in intellectual life.⁴⁹

The nature of the science versus religion debate may also have been miscast or misunderstood. The religious historians' approach to science has centred on intellectual questions. They have focussed on the role science played in understanding ultimate matters, such as the creation of humankind or how God operated in the world, overlooking the role science played at the more mundane, but equally important level, of enhancing material progress.⁵⁰ It may be that religious belief was not abandoned because scientific advances suggested that parts of the Bible to be mythical. Rather, it may be more accurate to suggest that people gradually became less dependent on God as they were able to assume a greater sense of control over nature and their destiny. We have not looked at the question of secularization on the more practical level of applied science. Did people become indifferent to religion because technological innovation based on new scientific knowledge made their world more secure? For example, technical advances – in the form of fertilizers or better strains of wheat that were not as vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather – may have gradually removed some uncertainty and thereby made it seem less necessary to look to religion for guarantees of survival or explanations of disaster. Did people become less

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the more secular atmosphere of university teaching, see Mario Creel, "H.M. Tory and the Secularization of Canadian Universities," *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No.4, Winter 1981, pp. 718-36.

⁴⁸ Frank M. Turner, "The Victorian Conflict Between Science and Religion: A Professional Dimension," *Isis*, 69, 1978, pp. 356-76.

⁴⁹ On the changing relationship between science and religion in Canada see Carl Berger, *Science, God, and Nature in Victorian Canada* (Toronto 1983).

⁵⁰ On the rise of science in Victorian Canada and its central importance in the "material progress" of the burgeoning Canadian nation, see Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of A Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto 1987).

diligent in praying for protection and giving thanks to God as a result? I am not suggesting that people abandoned belief in God, but rather that as the world became a little less mysterious and threatening, they invoked the supernatural less frequently. There may have been a subtle change toward a more secular orientation in the basic ideas and practices that sustained people from one day to the next.

The difficulty in assessing the problem of religion and science is that we have not investigated the history of science at a popular level. Although we know what leading clergy and theologians as well as what some scientists thought; we know little about how the laity, readers in *Mechanic's Institute* libraries or farmers responded to the scientific advances of the nineteenth century. The social history of science in Canada has not yet been developed, making commentaries on the question of science and religion incomplete.⁵¹

Another area of science that may well directly impinge on the question of secularization is medicine. The rise of scientific medicine and emergence of the physician raises even more compelling and important questions. In the early nineteenth century disease and especially the outbreak of a contagious epidemic, such as smallpox or cholera, was often regarded as being Providential – the visitation of God upon an individual or society as punishment for sinfulness. By the late nineteenth century, disease was increasingly understood in natural or medical terms and without reference to divine intervention. As S.E.D. Shortt has written: “the epidemics had been secularized and the days of fast and prayer replaced by references to civic hygiene and public health ordinances.”⁵² Similarly, in this new world of

⁵¹ One notable exception is Martin Hewitt, “Science as Spectacle: Popular Scientific Culture in Saint John, New Brunswick, 1830-1850” *Acadiensis*, 18, 1, Autumn 1988. Jerry Pittman’s important reconsideration of the science versus religion debate in Canada is narrowly focussed on the writings of a few learned editors. It does not get any closer than those studying the clergy or theologians in appreciating or defining the popular response to Darwinism and evolution. See Jerry N. Pittman, “Darwinism and Evolution: Three Nova Scotia Religious Newspapers Respond, 1860-1900” *Acadiensis*, 22, 2, (Spring 1993), pp. 40-60.

⁵² S.E.D. Shortt, “Physicians and Psychics: The Anglo-American Medical Response to Spiritualism, 1870-1890,” *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 39, July 1984, p. 352. This point is most dramatically demonstrated by Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years in the United States in 1832, 1849, 1866* (Chicago 1962). In the Canadian context, see Geoffrey Bilson, *A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto 1980); J.M. Bliss, *Plague: A Story of Smallpox in Montreal* (Toronto 1991); Barbara Craig, “Smallpox in Ontario: Public and Professional Perceptions of Disease, 1884-1885” in Charles G. Roland, ed., *Health, Disease and Medicine: Essays in Canadian History* (Toronto 1982), pp. 215-49. A

scientific medicine, the body was no longer viewed as the pinnacle of divine creation, but rather a physiological entity. This transformation of the medical profession's understanding has been termed the "secularization of physiology" by S.E.D. Shortt. "It was a physiological paradigm," he has written, "the unity of which derived not from the intent of an imminent God, but from an entirely secular system of natural principles."⁵³ The medicalization of society was only beginning in the late nineteenth century. By no means did everyone accept the medical view of disease and physiology; but a new way of understanding the human condition was emerging which had powerful secular implications.

What is also significant, here, is that there was not a great therapeutic breakthrough in the ability of physicians to cure disease. Mortality rates from epidemic disease or infant and maternal mortality had not significantly declined in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ The rise of medicine and the physician in Canadian society may have reflected a change in popular attitudes – a growing faith in the value of science.⁵⁵ Scientific medicine could identify symptoms as well as describe and perhaps explain the impact of disease and this was done without reference to the supernatural.

The medicalization of Canadian society perhaps becomes most clear in changing attitudes to death and dying. As the nineteenth century advanced, the traditional belief that divine providence was directly responsible for death and that humans had no choice but to accept death as a final and often painful trial was in decline. Death was increasingly regarded as the result of

good example of the early providential view of disease can be found in John Bethune, "A Sermon, Preached on Wednesday, February 6, 1833, Being The Day Appointed By Proclamation For A General Thanksgiving To Almighty God For Having Removed The Heavy Judgement Of The Pestilence," Montreal 1833.

⁵³ S.E.D. Shortt, *Victorian Lunacy: Richard M. Bucke and the Practice of late Nineteenth-Century Psychiatry* (Cambridge 1986), p. 71.

⁵⁴ On the persistence of high mortality rates in Canada, see Jean-Claude Robert, "The City of Wealth and Death: Urban Mortality in Montreal 1821-1871," in Wendy Mitchison & Janice Dickin McGinnis, eds., *Essays in the History of Canadian Medicine* (Toronto 1988), pp. 18-38; Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto 1974), pp. 88-105; Alan F.J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914* (Montreal 1975), pp. 223-238; and Rosemary Gagan, "Mortality Patterns and Public Health in Hamilton, Canada 1900-14," *Urban History Review*, XVII, 3, Feb. 1989, pp. 161-75.

⁵⁵ S.E.D. Shortt, "Physicians, Science, and Status: Issues in the Professionalization of Anglo-American Medicine in the Nineteenth Century," *Medical History*, 27, 1983, p. 67.

natural causes and consequently it was thought that dying need not be a matter of passively resigning to an all powerful God.⁵⁶ This modern outlook made intervention in the process of death possible without fear that the inscrutable will of God was being somehow transgressed. People were less willing to accept the pain and timing of death with resignation. Medical intervention was encouraged as a means to forestall death and to take the pain away.⁵⁷ One of the most important transformations in the social history of the nineteenth century was the gradual emergence of the physician at the bedside of the dying. The emergence of the physician did not exclude the clergyman from these important human dramas. In their role as pastors, the clergy still played a role in helping individuals and families cope with illnesses and death.⁵⁸ But their relative position or status beside the sick bed and in the dying chambers had diminished. The rise of medicine suggests that an immense amount of resources and effort were beginning to be employed in order to challenge or resist what had been understood to be the will of God.

People were becoming more dependent on their own knowledge and actions to deal with their situation and destiny. When this more natural or secular way of dealing with matters of misfortune, affliction, and death emerged is a notoriously difficult question to answer. An important clue may rest with the rise of the insurance industry in the nineteenth century – a phenomenon that superbly indicates the emergence of a consumer culture. Insurance with its schemes to protect people from the ruinous fate of crop failure, fire, theft, sickness or death in the family may have represented an important secularization of people's attitudes. Perhaps it is significant that the last frontier of this industry was the sale of life insurance policies. It was difficult to deal with the popular notion that life insurance somehow

⁵⁶ Compare William Snodgrass, "A Sermon Preached in St. Andrew's Church, Toronto, On the Occasion of the Lamented Death of One of the Elders of the Church ..." (Toronto 1865) with D.J. Macdonnell, "Death Abolished: A Sermon Preached in St. Andrew's Church, Toronto on Sunday, 3rd March 1889 In Connection With the Death of George Paxton Young" (Toronto 1889).

⁵⁷ See for example, William Cochrane, *A Quiet and Gentle Life. In Memoriam: Mary Neilson Houstoun Cochrane* (Brantford 1871), pp. 45-6. For these themes in the American context, see James Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia 1980).

⁵⁸ The pastoral role of the clergy in Canadian society has not been analyzed by Canadian historians. Most of the work on the clergy in Canada deals with what they preached or their position on a wide variety of social questions or intellectual issues. One of the most important aspects of the clerical profession, therefore, has been overlooked.

challenged divine will. It is also noteworthy that some of the first insurance schemes in Canada were devised by the churches in the 1850s for the clergy and their families. The many Widow's and Orphan's funds sponsored by churches functioned as life insurance plans.⁵⁹ The insurance industry serves as a concrete example of a secular means to cushion people from things that were beyond their control.

One might wonder if insurance did not somehow begin to displace – or at least accompany – prayer as the means to gain a sense of security or protection from cruel misfortune. I am not suggesting anything dramatic, such as people no longer prayed for health and well-being or for good weather and protection from catastrophe. Rather I am wondering whether people were as convinced that prayer had real effect in influencing the supernatural to undertake beneficent action or whether people were sure that God played a direct role in their destiny. As Brian McKillop has pointed out, this question touches the very heart of the secularization debate.⁶⁰ If things like health, a safe delivery during childbirth, good harvests, sufficient food, and prosperity were no longer regarded as being in God's beneficent power to bestow but rather the result of human effort and capability then clearly a process of secularization was underway. It is highly significant if people were indeed becoming less inclined to refer to the supernatural or hope for the miraculous in their daily lives.

Attention to social history is crucial for a complete picture of the relation of the sacred and the secular to be drawn. There are many indicators from the late nineteenth century suggesting that powerful forces of secularization were well underway within Protestant Canadian society. The clergy's fight against the running of streetcars on Sundays in Toronto – a battle they ultimately lost – is a solid example of how the forces of industrialization, capitalism, consumerism, and the pursuit of leisure undermined the quiet and worshipful Sunday. In the study of this battle by Armstrong and Nelles, the clergy are depicted as concerned social critics who quite perceptively discerned the new and powerful forces of secularization and sought to stem the tide of these forces by protecting the traditional church-dominated Sunday.⁶¹ *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company*, however, has not

⁵⁹ See the description of the Free Church's plan that began in 1852 in Richard Vaudry, *The Free Church in Victorian Canada, 1844-1861* (Waterloo 1989), pp. 106-7.

⁶⁰ A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence*, p. 157

⁶¹ Christopher Armstrong and H.V. Nelles, *The Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company: Sunday Streetcars and Municipal Reform in Toronto, 1888-1897* (Toronto 1977), p. 180

been taken into account by the combatants in the secularization debate, reflecting the emphasis on intellectual issues at the expense of social realities.

Other events in the 1890s suggest that the role of the churches and clergy in Canada was being reassessed and was perhaps receding. Many people were no longer willing to accord them some kind of special or favoured status. For example, as part of a more general reform of taxation in the Province of Ontario, the Government canvassed the municipalities with regard to the practice of granting taxation exemptions. The Treasurer, A.M. Ross, reported to the legislature that a principal cause of complaint was that the land held by churches was exempt. The public was also decidedly against the exemption on the salaries and residences of clergymen. He reported that many returns indicated that the clergy should be placed on the same basis as everyone else. As a result the Ontario Government passed legislation repealing the traditional taxation exemptions for churches and the clergy.⁶² Such issues have been largely ignored by historians of religion and the critics of secularization.

Identifying elements of secularization in the nineteenth century poses a problem that the critics of the secularization thesis have been quick to point out: if Canada was experiencing secularization then how do we explain the growth of the churches, the renewal of theology, and the importance of revivals? This attempt to discredit the application of secularization to the nineteenth century is dependent on the understanding that secularization means absolute and rapid decline of religion and that a society experiencing secularization cannot be one in which Christianity is deeply held and widespread in its influence.

A process of secularization does not imply that religion is being suddenly and dramatically moved to the margins. Religion can remain quite buoyant and vibrant, revival activity and church growth can continue. But at the same time other values, activities, and forms of knowledge can arise, not necessarily challenging religion and the church directly, but competing with the church and the clergy for authority and influence in society. Also church growth and religious change can mask the degree to which religion and the churches were making accommodations with these new forces. Such accommodation may have significantly undermined the supernatural aspects of the faith. Indeed there was a significant amount of secularization from

⁶² *The Globe*, 6 March 1890; 1 April 1890. Statutes of Ontario, 1890, Ch.55, 'An Act Respecting Exemptions from Municipal Taxation,' sections 1 & 2. See also, Margaret Evans, *Sir Oliver Mowat*, (Toronto 1992), pp. 267-8.

within religion and the churches. Some of the more potent sources of a more secular outlook came from the clergy instead of secularist free-thinkers.⁶³

By the late nineteenth century in Canada, there were a host of social forces and institutions – such as science and medicine, the daily press, the bureaucratic state, more secular universities, consumerism, the insurance industry, organized sport, to name but a few – that were moving to the forefront of social and intellectual life. The church was still a powerful force but there was much competition which effectively began to move the church away from the very core of society and culture to a different position – not yet on the margins – but one in which it had to share its traditional status as being integral to society and people's lives. Canada was more pluralistic – no one institution, activity, set of beliefs or moral code could dominate.

This level of studying the problem of secularization goes much beyond assessing the role of the church in society, the thought of theologians and the clergy, or the faith of people in the churchpews. It involves the study of popular beliefs and practices. The secularization debate has almost exclusively been the preserve of religious or church historians. Focussing on the thought of theologians or clergy, is too narrow. A broader canvass is crucial. The issue of secularization will not be settled by assessing religious thought and practice alone – although that area of inquiry remains crucially important. It cannot be resolved unless we understand how religion and the churches stood in relation to other ideas and institutions in society or how the clergy stood in the eyes of the public. Were, for example, the clergy considered “a different kind of gentlemen” because they were ordained or did people accord them the same status as other respected public servants or professionals in society? There is much in the field of the social history and popular culture rather than intellectual and religious history that we need to investigate before we can be certain about the question of secularization. To summon historians studying topics such as medicine, popular culture, consumerism and the various aspects of capitalism to enter the fray is not to promote the continued marginalization of religious history. Rather it is to encourage the further integration of religious history with social and cultural history.

Attempts to dismiss the concept of secularization are premature. There is no question that the relationship between religion and society is complex. It is doubtful that secularization explains everything, but it does explain a great deal. There may well be further refinements of what is meant or entailed in the term secularization, but I doubt it can be abandoned.

⁶³ *Secularizing the Faith*, passim.